

Symbolism & Imagery in Literature: Definitions & Examples

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Explore symbolism and imagery in literature. Learn the definition and purpose of imagery and symbolism, read about symbolic imagery, and find examples.

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Symbolism: A Figurative Language

There are several types of **figurative language** that writers use for various purposes. The most common are metaphors, similes, personification, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, and **symbolism**. Figurative is the opposite of literal; therefore, when figurative language is used, its meaning is something other than its dictionary definition. Symbols are no exception. A symbol represents something other than what it represents literally. Symbols add deeper meaning to a story. Symbols can be anything, and their meaning depends on the context in which they are found. Whether or not a reader can identify the symbols used in literature depends on their knowledge and experience. Writers use symbols to convey ideas, without actually specifying the idea, in order to get the reader to contemplate a theme that spans time and its relevance to culture and society. Additionally, readers might interpret the symbolism differently, which is encouraged in literary analysis, as long as conclusions are valid and can be supported by the text.

Examples of Symbolism in Literature

One way to identify symbols used in literature is to look for repetition. It is important to remember that writers are purposeful when constructing their work. The repetition is not because the writer couldn't think of a different word or idea; it is to draw the reader's attention. For example, in Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, birds appear repeatedly. To figure out what the birds might represent, first consider the literal qualities of a bird.

- Birds fly
- Birds can be pets
- Birds have hollow bones
- Birds have feathers
- Birds have beaks
- Birds lay eggs

Now take a look at the context. In other words, what is the novel about, and in what situations do the birds appear?

Chopin's *The Awakening* challenges the status quo of women's roles in the 1800s. Generally, women of this time period were expected to become wives and mothers and nothing more. The main character in the story feels trapped and slowly but surely claims her independence. In the story, birds appear in several contexts.

- Birds appear in cages
- Birds appear injured
- A parrot and a mockingbird are used
- Birds are soaring in the air

Based on the context, a reader could conclude that the birds in cages at the story's beginning might represent the main character's feelings of being trapped. The parrot might represent blind obedience, as a parrot repeats what it is told, similar to the expectation of women during this time. As the novel

progresses, the birds are free and could represent the protagonist breaking from tradition. In the end, a bird with a broken wing appears, which might represent the inner conflict that the protagonist is unable to resolve.

Symbolism Examples in Poetry

Symbolism in poetry is used in the same way as in prose and for the same reasons. In keeping with birds as symbols, ponder the narrative poem "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe. Within the first few stanzas, Poe builds suspense around the mystery of the "tapping" sound that the speaker hears "rapping" at his "chamber door." In the seventh stanza, it flies a large blackbird.

*Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
in there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore...*

In the literal sense, the Raven is just a bird making a racket outside the speaker's window, but symbolically, coupled with the fact that it is a large bird and black in color, it could become an ominous symbol of the speaker's grief. As the poem continues, the bird taunts him with the word *nevermore*, and by the poem's end, this seemingly harmless creature, described as "stately" and "saintly" in the beginning, becomes a "demon" as it forces the speaker to accept that his love, Lenore, is gone forever.

*And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming...*

Poe does not actually change the symbolism of the Raven; however, the speaker of the poem changes his opinion of the bird as the poem progresses.

Imagery in Literature

Imagery in literature is achieved when a writer uses sensory language to appeal to the reader's senses and is often referred to as **sensory description**. These descriptions are used to help readers form pictures, imagine movement, and feel emotion while reading. All good writers use imagery. Without it, the reader would not be able to connect to the characters or the plot. Imagery is food for the imagination.

Types of Imagery

Five types of imagery align with the five senses. Of the remaining two types, one refers to a person's sense of movement, and the other relates to emotion.

- Visual imagery appeals to the reader's sense of sight
- Auditory imagery appeals to the reader's sense of sound
- Olfactory imagery appeals to the reader's sense of smell
- Gustatory imagery appeals to the reader's sense of taste
- Tactile imagery appeals to the reader's sense of touch
- Kinesthetic imagery uses motion words to help the reader sense movement
- Organic imagery uses words to appeal to the reader's emotions

Examples of Imagery

The first example comes from the novel, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* written by Jonathan Safran Foer in the chapter titled, "The Only Animal."

"I read the first chapter of *A Brief History of Time* when Dad was still alive, and I got incredibly heavy boots about how relatively insignificant life is, and how, compared to the universe and compared to time, it didn't even matter if I existed at all."

The significant imagery in this sentence comes with the words *heavy boots*. This is organic imagery because most readers can empathize with what the character is feeling since most have worn heavy boots and have felt the emotional stress that the heavy boots represent. In the story, the heavy boots likely symbolize the emotional stress felt by the character due to the loss of his father.

The second example comes from a poem written by Sylvia Plath. In this poem, *Metaphors*, Plath uses several types of imagery in her description of pregnancy over the course of nine months. She is particularly clever in employing the more obscure auditory imagery.

*I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.*

The auditory imagery is produced by the *nine* lines, each containing *nine* syllables. When read aloud, they create a rhythm to symbolize the waiting, weary discomfort, and anxious anticipation that *nine* months of pregnancy often brings.

Symbolic Imagery

Symbolic Imagery is when the imagery in literature or poetry is analyzed for symbolism, and the themes become visible. Reading is all about discovering the author's message to the reader. An analysis of the parts will lead to the meaning of the whole.

Symbolic Imagery Examples

In his novel *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien combines imagery and symbolism to describe what each soldier carries in his backpack. There are the necessary items a soldier carries, such as "*P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water.*" The words here help the reader visualize what is in each backpack, but the construction of the long list allows the reader to *feel* the physical weight of what is in each backpack.

Then there are the personal items that each of the men carries that symbolize the emotional weight of war. "*First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha...*" to symbolize the innocence of youth, which Jimmy is far removed from in Vietnam. "*Dave Jensen carried three pairs of socks...*" for extra protection to symbolize the futility of protection in the sites of a sniper. O'Brien continues adding items to each backpack as the plot moves forward. For example, steel helmets, fatigue jackets and trousers, jungle boots, and a steel-centered, nylon-covered flak jacket, guns, ammo, rain gear, and bandages are all added to the soldiers' backpacks. The weight of war becomes heavier and heavier toward the climax of the story. O'Brien's novel includes all seven examples of imagery and is packed full of symbolism.

The poem *Harlem* by Langston Hughes provides an example of symbolic imagery in poetry.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore —

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over —

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

In this poem, Hughes surmises what happens to an unfulfilled dream through a series of questions. The reader is able to visualize a wrinkly raisin, symbolic of an old dried-up dream, and the *sore* represents the pain of longing. Anyone who has encountered *rotten meat* will recoil from the memory of the smell and understand the symbolism in a memory that leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. The *heavy load* that *sags* represents a dream that oppresses the dreamer, and the word *explode* appeals to our sense of sound while symbolizing something that can no longer be ignored. The symbolism in the poem might represent the African American experience, it might represent any dream that has been squashed, or there might be another valid interpretation that could be supported by the text.

Lesson Summary

Symbolism is one type of **figurative language** that writers use to add depth to the story. Symbols have a *literal and figurative* meaning. The symbolic meaning is discoverable through context, and writers use this device to connect the reader to ideas without directly stating them. To identify symbolism, a reader should keep an eye out for repetition. Writers are purposeful in construction, so repetition has meaning. The birds that appear in Kate Chopin's work, "The Awakening" have literal and symbolic meanings. Where and how they appear in the story shows that the birds are used to represent the oppressive roles of women during this time period.

Imagery helps readers make connections to ideas and characters through the use of **sensory description**. There are seven types of imagery: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, kinesthetic, and organic. Writers usually use a combination of types to draw the reader into the story. The poem *Metaphors* creates

auditory imagery as a result of the rhythm produced by the nine syllables on each line. **Symbolic imagery** is used to make the themes of the work visible. For example, the symbolic imagery in the poem *Harlem* might be symbolic of the African American experience. The imagery produced by the raisin in the poem is an example of something with a symbolic meaning that is very different from its literal meaning.

Video Transcript

What Is Symbolism?

'Harlem'

by Langston Hughes (1951)

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

In this poem about the African American experience during the first half of the 20th century, Langston Hughes uses objects like 'a raisin in the sun' and a 'festering sore' to describe what he thinks happens when dreams are put off or deferred. The images are powerful because they give a memorable and concrete idea of the ill effects of unrealized dreams. Writers, like Langston Hughes, frequently feature **symbolism** in their work, using an object, person, animal or even color to stand in for an abstract idea.

We are surrounded by symbols. The dove and yellow ribbon are just two of many symbols for peace throughout the world. In the United States, red, white and blue and the Statue of Liberty don't just symbolize America but also patriotism. Different cultures have their own symbols and symbolic meanings, so while most brides in the West wear white on their wedding day, in many Asian cultures, brides wear red, which represents good fortune.

Symbolism in Literature

Writers use symbolism to strengthen their writing, making it more interesting and adding a layer of deeper meaning. A second grader might write, 'I love Charlie!', but experienced writers like Robert Burns, who lived from 1759 - 1796, write, 'My love is like a red, red rose.'

We don't know how exactly the second grader loves Charlie. Is he her brother? A schoolyard crush? 'A red, red rose' says a lot more because of all of the ideas a red rose symbolizes in our and Burns' culture. A red rose means romance and passionate love.

'My love is like a red, red rose' is one type of symbolism used in literature (and *The Bachelor*): a metaphor. A metaphor and its cousin the simile both use comparisons between two objects or ideas. In this case, by comparing 'love' and 'a red, red rose,' Burns (and *The Bachelor*) use the rose as a symbol for romantic love. Another important type of symbolism found in literature is the use of story elements, like plot, setting, characters or objects in the text, to symbolize something more meaningful.

Allegories, such as George Orwell's 1945 novella *Animal Farm*, use stories with hidden meanings to share a lesson or provide commentary on institutions like government or religion. Authors often do this by extending symbols through an entire literary work. For example, the plot of *Animal Farm*, where farm animals rise up against their human masters, mirrors and critiques the political events in Russia in the early 1900s, with animal characters symbolizing real-life political figures.

In a novel like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), the symbolism is less obvious. The main character, Edna Pontellier, is trapped by society's expectations of women, and mothers in particular. Chopin uses birds throughout the novel - a parrot and mockingbird in a cage, a pigeon house and a bird with a broken wing - as a way to symbolize Edna's feelings of being trapped.

What Is Imagery?

Think back to the Langston Hughes poem at the beginning of this lesson. Is there a particular image that stuck with you? Playwright Lorraine Hansberry was so inspired by the image of 'a raisin in the sun' as a symbol for the thwarted dreams of African Americans that she wrote a play on the topic and called it *A Raisin in the Sun*. First performed in 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* does not have any literal raisins in the sun. Instead, it focuses on a black family living in poverty in Chicago's South Side.

Imagery is the use of descriptive language, which appeals not just to sight but to all of the senses. Imagery often makes writing more interesting through the use of sensory details and can add a layer of deeper symbolic meaning to the text. The images in the poem 'Harlem' by Langston Hughes - 'a raisin in the sun,' a 'festered sore' - make the poem more engaging and meaningful.

Imagery in Literature

Author Sylvia Plath is known for her use of imagery, especially in her poetry. In the poem 'Metaphors' (1960), Plath uses several images to describe her pregnancy. The poem begins:

*I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.*

The speaker in the poem 'Metaphors' uses several different comparisons to describe her pregnancy. While 'a riddle in nine syllables' is not a particularly vivid visual image, the line contains exactly nine syllables as well as a repetition of sounds, making it an example of auditory imagery.

'Metaphors' contains a great deal of visual imagery as well. Pregnant women are sometimes said to be 'as big as an elephant' or 'as big as a house,' images which call to mind the physical changes in their bodies. 'A melon strolling on two tendrils' is another visual image to symbolize a pregnant woman's shape, and 'O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers' is an example of 'tactile imagery,' which pertains to the sense of texture and touch.

Finally, the line 'This loaf's big with its yeasty rising' is a visual image, which is also tactile, olfactory (related to smell) and gustatory (related to taste). The use of imagery in the poem adds another level of meaning, with the comparison to the process of bread dough rising highlighting the organic, physical nature of pregnancy. The imagery makes pregnancy seem out of the speaker's control, symbolizing her complex feelings about having a baby.

Lesson Summary

In literature, **symbolism** is the use of objects, people or colors to represent larger ideas, adding a layer of deeper meaning to a work of art. Symbolism can range from metaphors and other comparisons - like 'a raisin in the sun' - to story elements like setting and characters - such as caged birds symbolizing feeling confined by gender roles.

Imagery is descriptive language that appeals to all the senses in order to make writing more interesting and meaningful. Imagery can be employed symbolically, such as the different imagery representing pregnancy in Sylvia Plath's poem, 'Metaphors.'

Learning Outcomes

Completing this lesson should enable you to:

- Define symbolism and imagery
- Give examples of symbolism and imagery in literature

Frequently Asked Questions

What is imagery in literature?

Imagery in literature is created to help the reader use their senses to produce the story details in their minds. Writers use imagery to help readers connect with the characters and the plot. Sensory language is used to create imagery.

What are the seven types of imagery?

The seven types of imagery are as follows:

- Visual refers to sight
- Auditory refers to sound
- Olfactory refers to smell
- Gustatory refers to taste
- Tactile refers to touch
- Kinesthetic refers to movement
- Organic refers to emotion

What's an example of symbolism in literature?

One example of symbolism in literature can be found in Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*. The literal interpretation of the Raven is that a blackbird flies through a window and perches itself above a door. The figurative interpretation is that the Raven symbolizes the speaker's grief and his difficulty accepting the loss he has suffered.

What is symbolism in literature?

Writers use symbolism to express concepts without actually naming the idea. They do this by referring to a person, place, animal, or thing that is used to mean something other than what it means in the dictionary. The meaning behind a symbol is reliant on context.



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